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AUTHOR	Whitney-Thomas, Jean; Thomas, Dawna M.
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ABSTRACT

This study examined how the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992 have been implemented in one state's vocational rehabilitation (VR) system. Eleven state and local office administrators and counselors participated in three focus groups that were organized so that members with similar positions and experiences in the VR system participated in the same discussion. State level administrators provided the most global perspective on the law's intentions and its desired impact, using the term "paradigm shift" to indicate the Amendments' proposal for broad-based change in disability policies and practices emphasizing employment. In contrast, local office administrators and supervisors focused more on the day-to-day management of the VR system and saw the Amendments primarily as giving greater autonomy to counselors. Counselors felt that the 60-day eligibility process timelines prevented them from providing the same level of individualized service and counseling as they provided prior to the Amendments and may hinder other elements of the Amendments, such as consumer empowerment and improved services. Suggestions for further investigation into whether the amendments have been successfully implemented are offered. (DB)

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Multiple Perspectives on Implementing the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992

by Jean Whitney-Thomas and Dawna M. Thomas

Introduction

The first years of this decade saw a surge in the rethinking and redrafting of policy related to disability in this country. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 1991, and the 1992 Rehabilitation Act Amendments comprise a body of clearly articulated anti-discrimination legislation and service priorities. These laws emphasize greater access to services and full involvement of individuals with disabilities in community life and service delivery (Goodall, Lawyer, & Wehman, 1994; Weber, 1994). In the Fall of 1994, the Institute for Community Inclusion convened a series of focus groups of vocational rehabilitation administrators and counselors in order to better understand how the Rehabilitation Act Amendments have been implemented in one state's system. The findings reported briefly here describe what these individuals perceive as the most important elements of the Amendments and how they feel service delivery has changed as a result.

Participants

A total of 11 state and local office administrators and counselors participated in three focus groups. The groups were organized so that members with similar positions and experiences within the VR system participated in the same discussion. Among the participants were three women and eight men; a number of whom had challenges including physical, medical, mild cognitive and visual impairments. These rehabilitation professionals have an average of 15 (ranging from 4.5-22) years of service in the state VR system. Three of the participants reported having Certified Rehabilitation Counselor licensure (CRC).

Varying Roles, Varying Perspectives

State level administrators provided the most global perspective on the law's intentions and it's desired impact. They used the term "paradigm shift" to indicate the Amendments' proposal for broad-based change in disability policies and practices. They saw the Amendments as a clear mandate to refocus the VR process from "employability" to "employment." As one state administrator said,

> *The purpose of the program is to put people to work. Not get ready to work; not talk about work, going to work, or think about work; not services, but work.*

Finally, this group described the Amendments to the law as emphasizing consumer empowerment, active involvement in the vocational rehabilitation process, and as a mechanism to implement the Americans with Disabilities Act.

In contrast to the state level administrators, local office administrators and supervisors provided insight to the law's impact on daily procedures, counselor decision making process, and professional development. Their discussion focused much more on the day-to-day management of the VR system given the new law. In their eyes, the Amendments gave greater autonomy to the counselors by allowing them to make eligibility decisions on an abbreviated time table. When asked about consumer empowerment issues, these administrators did not feel that this was a new issue or as one person said, "a revelation."

All three groups talked about the new sixty-day eligibility decision making process and agreed that this change had the greatest impact on the VR system's delivery of services. Administrators saw the 60 day limit as a streamlining mechanism to break through the system's barriers and bureaucracy. Counselors disagreed, however, and felt that the 60 day eligibility process prevents them from providing the same level of individualized service and counseling as they did prior to the Amendments. As one counselor said,

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> *It seems like I'm doing an awful lot more work now than I did before the law. Different kind of*

work, I should say...more paper work...there are also more hoops to jump through: I also find that I'm pushing clients away more, where I may spend a lot of counseling time with clients to get them to where they want to go before the Act.

The counselors suggested that the new eligibility timeline may actually hinder elements of the amendments that are less easily defined such as consumer empowerment and improved services.

Implications

These discussion groups give insight into the meaning of the amended rehabilitation law but falls short of answering the question as to whether the amendments have been successfully implemented. Below are a list of recommendations for future attempts to understand change in the state Vocational Rehabilitation agencies:

- ***Compare impressions of change across levels of the agency.*** Since there is evidence of different interpretations of the law, future investigations of change should take into consideration this potential diversity. Larger samples of counselors and administrators may have different opinions when asked whether or not day to day practice has changed. The perspectives of VR personnel should be compared and the samples should include voices from multiple levels in the agency.
- ***The voice of the consumer should be heard.*** As part of the study from which these findings come, a focus group of consumers were asked for their impressions of the changes in the law. These individuals were not aware of the law itself, although each person had a great deal to say about their experiences within the state's VR system. This small set of consumers who were not aware of the Amendments, may or may not be representative of national or even statewide trends. A larger sample of VR consumers should be surveyed as to their knowledge of the Amendments and their impression of change in the delivery of VR services.
- ***Mechanisms to measure and enhance consumer involvement need to be developed.*** The Amendments were crafted around the principles of consumer empowerment and involvement in the rehabilitation process. There is a need to document consumer involvement where it occurs, identify areas where it is lacking, and develop strategies to enhance involvement generally. Future research should explore the knowledge, role, and influence that consumers have of policy and on service delivery.

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